

It's well known that golfers who play down South during the winter like lush, green grass. To provide colorful aesthetics, some clubs choose to overseed their courses. However, for some superintendents that annual chore is becoming smaller in scope, if not vanishing altogether.

A FINANCIAL DECISION

From the late 1970s until 1997, Pinehurst Resort overseeded tees and fairways only, says Bob Farren, CGCS, director of grounds and golf course management. Then in 1997, it started wall-to-wall overseeding, adding the rough.

"We never bought into overseeding the rough because it was detrimental to the turf," Farren says. "It was a battle with the trees for water and nutrients. And besides, the benefit of overseeding the rough only lasts eight weeks."

Farren and his staff used the depressed economy as the basis to cut costs and eliminate overseeding in the 419 bermudagrass rough on all eight golf courses at the resort this coming winter. The decision, ultimately made by the

executive committee with recommendations by the maintenance staff, was the first of several cost-cutting measures.

"We would always evaluate overseeding in the summer over the years," Farren says. "Revenue is down this year, and we needed to cut costs. This is one way to return the golf course to a more traditional and historic appearance. There might be a few people who question the look, but we probably won't have too much pushback."

Pinehurst will save seed, fuel, labor, water and transition costs (sod is needed in some shaded areas where the bermuda doesn't grow) by not overseeding, which equals \$250,000 to \$300,000.

The Country Club of North Carolina, just down the road from Pinehurst, doesn't overseed anything, Farren says.

"The members decided that," he says. "They don't have as much play. Overseeding for us in the fairway is a must because of resort play."

NO MORE WALL-TO-WALL

When superintendent Bill Kistler arrived at Tampa (Fla.) Palms Golf & Country Club, seven years ago, the club was overseeding the course wall to wall. That soon changed, as Kistler eliminated overseeding the 419 bermudagrass in the rough first, then the fairways.

"We also had to go back and clean up the rough because of the rye that was coming back," he says. "After we eliminated overseeding in the fairways, playability got better. We had no complaints from members about the

aesthetics of not overseeding the fairway and rough. Players are getting a nice roll and lie in the fairways."

There was never a need to overseed the TifEagle bermudagrass greens because they pretty much held their color all year, Kistler says. Now, he just overseeds the tee tops.

"We get quite fast on our greens in the winter – 11.5 to 12 on the Stimpmeter," he says.

Kistler talked with others who don't overseed before making the decision to eliminate overseeding the fairways and rough.

"One guy in the area told me he hadn't overseeded fairways in 25 years," Kistler says.

Some members needed to be educated about the decision to reduce overseeding. In fact, the golf and green committee made the decision without a member vote. Influential members spread the word and explained the benefits of not overseeding fairways and rough. Controlling costs, being in a drought, and wear and tear on equipment all factored into the decision.

"We didn't advertise that we weren't going to overseed," Kistler says. "Some members couldn't tell. Our fairways still stripe nicely. We looked at the playability for golfers. There's no sticky rye, and the golfers are getting tight lies and better ball roll."

Since Kistler has reduced overseeding he has saved money on seed and mowing. He doesn't have to inconvenience golfers by keeping them off the fairways for seven to 10 days, like when the ryegrass was germinating, or when he watered the cool-season grass during the day.

When Tampa Palms – a private, 18-hole facility with a maintenance budget of about \$700,000 – was being overseeded wall to wall,

GETTING OVER OVERSEEDING

Facilities choose to overseed less, or not at all, to save money and improve playability. BY JOHN WALSH

The Moorings Club in Vero Beach, Fla., has gradually reduced overseeding since 2003.

it cost about \$25,000 a year. Now, overseeding just the tee tops costs about \$4,000. Some of that savings went to the bottom line; some is spent on detail work, such as drainage and tree trimming. Some went to an increased herbicide budget for weed control.

Plus, nonoverseeded turf looks better than overseeded turf in the spring, Kistler says.

"We had the best conditions around because we had no transition issues," he says. "It didn't look patchy and rough."

Many years of overseeding were detrimental to the playability of the course, Kistler says. ClubCorp, which manages Tampa Palms, wasn't a part of the decision to cut back on overseeding; but now, the company is more involved in such decisions at other facilities in its portfolio because it's looking for savings.

WEIGHING THE OPTIONS

Craig Weyandt, golf course superintendent at The Moorings Club in Vero Beach, Fla., manages TifEagle greens and 419/common bermudagrass everywhere else on the course.

Weyandt, who has been at the private, 18-hole club for eight years, started reducing overseeding in 2003 when the club renovated its 25-year-old, push-up Tifdwarf/328 greens to USGA spec greens with TifEagle, so they wouldn't have to be overseeded.

"Transition was always an issue," Weyandt says. "And the old greens didn't provide the quality members wanted year round."

Weyandt overseeded the rest of the golf course every year since he has been there except for last winter, when the only area he overseeded was the driving range tee because he thought divot recovery would be a problem.

The green committee made the decision not to overseed, and the board accepted the decision, which was primarily a financial one. Environmental reasons didn't factor into the decision, Weyandt says.

"I waffled back and forth about the decision not to overseed and didn't give the members a definitive yes or no because it's not my course," he says. "I'm just the professional hired to maintain it. I did put together a pros and cons

list about not overseeding for them. It was a roll of the dice at first.

"It turned out to be a good decision so much so that I don't see us overseeding in the near future," he adds. "It's pretty tough to justify overseeding here. In the past, it was done primarily for aesthetics. We used *Poa trivialis*, which striped nicely. The bermuda doesn't stripe as nicely as the *Poa*, but it stripes better than expected."

Comments from members were positive.

"Although the turf isn't as lush or green, members should be able to get an extra five or 10 yards of ball roll," Weyandt says. "It should improve their game. That was our selling point anyway."

Weyandt is saving \$22,000 from the seed cost, as well as fuel, labor and irrigation costs related to overseeding. Now labor is freed up to work on divot repair, trimming and edging.

"The course is more groomed this year than in any year past," he says.

The fuel savings is considerable. Weyandt was spending \$200 to \$300 on diesel fuel every



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TURF MANAGEMENT

two weeks from November through March. Now he's spending \$60 a month. As far as mowing, it depends on the temperature. This past winter, Weyandt didn't mow for three weeks.

Another benefit of not overseeding is better weed control. Weyandt can use a broader range of herbicides for broadleaf and grassy weeds.

Overseeding is a hassle in spring and fall, so in some ways, not overseeding is less stressful for Weyandt; but he still deals with stress, it's just a different kind.

"I get nervous when a cold front comes though and think about how much cart traffic will damage the turf," he says.

Because not overseeding went well, the committee agreed not to overseed for a while. But decisions such as these are influenced by what other clubs in the area are doing.

"A lot of superintendents talked before the fall," Weyandt says. "And a couple high-end clubs in the area chose not to overseed, so others followed suit. Members of this club are members at two or three other clubs in the area. It has to be a conscious decision between the board and committee to evaluate each year."

Yet, a benefit of overseeding can be increased membership.

"If I overseed and nobody else in the area does, the course will look better," Weyandt says. "When you look at the cost to overseed (\$20,000 to \$30,000), which can help attract new members, it's cheap."

TRENDSSETTING

Reducing overseeding is related to the general trend of reducing highly maintained areas.

"We're reducing those areas 10 or 12 percent," Farren says. "We'll be mowing far less areas around the tees to help return the course to a more natural looking environment, which will be a visual impact."

"It's a difficult sell to some," Farren says. "But the decision might be easier if Pinehurst is used as an example."

In central Florida, it's not necessary to overseed, says Kistler, adding that there have been no severe winters the past several years, just a few frosts.

"Not overseeding is becoming the norm," he says. "It's more cost-driven than anything. But I don't see myself changing our practices even when the economy gets better. Once you go down this road and get members accustomed to this, you stay on this path." GCI

John Walsh is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.